ALTERNATIVES TO THE POLICE

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"Asking the question 'what are alternatives to policing?' is to ask the question 'what are alternatives to capitalism?'" said Luis Fernandez, Professor of Criminology and Criminal Justice at Northern Arizona University, in a phone interview with The Daily.

By definition, policing is the regulation and control of a community – "the role of the police is to maintain the capitalist social order," Fernandez said. "A lot of [the] time the role of police is to maintain the social order so that those particular people who have power can do their business with the least amount of disruption...possible."

Part of maintaining the current social order means that the police force does not treat everyone on a level playing field. "Capitalism develops very specific kinds of social arrangements, that for the most part require a very strong stratification of people. You need police to maintain that particular kind of order…[the actions of the police are] not equally distributed – it's not equal opportunity policing," Fernandez said. This leads to higher rates of police brutality and incarceration in less privileged populations.

Activities such as watching, recording, and noting police activities – promoted by activist networks such as Copwatch – can occasionally work to counteract the aggressive actions of the police by changing the power dynamic in favour of the people who may otherwise be harmed by the police.

"[Copwatch] has a certain kind of Foucauldian power where the police officers, if they think they are going to be watched, they are much less likely to abuse people," Fernandez said.

Imagining a world without police, however, is daunting – without police, who would respond to emergencies? Who would we call when we see a crime being committed? Despite this, Fernandez doesn't see a society without police to be that far off.

"Most of our communities already exist without policing. Most of our human interactions are already outside of the purview of police officers," he said. "Most of the social relationships between people do not require police intervention," he added.

While a complete abolition of the police system would require a change in social order, some alternatives to the current police system set out to empower people to keep their communities safe, while encouraging everyone to live lives that are free of violence and oppression. A society with little or no policing requires strong community organizations to mediate and react to conflict when it does occur.

Restorative justice

Restorative justice, as an example of an alternative to police, has a long history in Canada, particularly within Indigenous communities. It traditionally lessens the state's role in dealing with crime, and focuses on methods like mediation, dialogue, and reconciliation, instead of

punishment.

Founded on the principle that traditional apparatuses of the criminal justice system typically do not take into account the needs of victims, restorative justice works to include victims in the process. It functions with the voluntary participation of victims, offenders, and community members. Victims typically address how the crime has impacted their lives, and offenders are encouraged to take responsibility.

“The collective body of citizens has the ability, in a deliberative, consensus model, to determine with the offender, whether the offender goes to jail or not,” Fernandez explained. “This becomes an alternative to law enforcement and policing because you have the power with the people, collectively,” he added.

There are several essential tenets unique to restorative justice: recognition that crime is a violation of one person by another, rather than an act against the state, and that it is harmful to both personal relationships and to communities. The process takes the holistic context of an offence into consideration, including moral, social, economic, political, and religious considerations.

Restorative justice has been recognized by the Supreme Court of Canada and is mentioned within the Criminal Code in paragraph 718.2(e). It is often used to try to lessen the large number of Indigenous peoples within the criminal justice and prison systems – Indigenous peoples make up approximately 2 per cent of Canada’s adult population, but made up between 17 and 18.5 per cent of federal prison admissions in 2006.

Peacemaking circles, a form of restorative justice seen in some Indigenous communities, focus on non-hierarchical dialogue between community, victim, and offender. These circles focus on looking at larger, structural issues of crime and prevention within the community, as opposed to focusing on crime on an individual basis.

Dissatisfied with Canada’s current punitive criminal justice and penal system and concerned that it unfairly targets Indigenous peoples, the Kahnawake Mohawk community, located on the South Shore of the St. Lawrence River, began to use Sken:nen A'onsonton, which means “to become peaceful again,” the traditional restorative justice system reintroduced by the Mohawk in Kahnawake in 2000. These practices provide alternative measures to the federal criminal justice system, and focus largely on preventative measures and interventions.

Other restorative justice models include Victim Offender Mediation programs (VOMPs), which originated in Ontario, and focus on problem-solving between victim and offender with the help of a trained mediator. Unfortunately, despite its success, the program was terminated in 2004 due to a lack of funding.

Historically, restorative justice has been used for addressing minor crimes, however, some, such as Howard Zehr, a professor of restorative justice at the Eastern Mennonite University, argue that it can be effective in cases of more serious crimes, such as sexual assault or murder. The evidence for this varies, and often depends on multiple variables, such as mediator training or the voluntary participation of all parties involved.

Preventative Measures

One key shortcoming of the police force is that it reacts to crime more often than it actively prevents crime. Communities that feel underserved by the police have thus had to come up with alternative methods in order to keep safe without police help; however, many of these methods seem to exacerbate the dichotomy between criminal and victim.

Anti-crime design is one such method. Groups like Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED) Ontario advocate for the creation of public spaces that actively prevent crime. For instance, CPTED suggests high visibility in public spaces – basically, more windows – to decrease secret spaces where crime may occur. With more observers, would-be criminals may be less likely to commit crimes. A crime prevention design technique called “natural access control” also suggests building fences to clearly delineate public and private spaces, or designing spaces so people know precisely where they are allowed and not allowed to go. Instead of constant police patrols or merely reactionary police work, this design-oriented approach physically prevents crime through space.

Community-based sexual assault centres have also emerged in the past decades as a valuable alternative to police. Locally, centres like SACOMSS or the Montreal Sexual Assault Centre give non-police aid to survivors of sexual assault. This includes helping survivors immediately after incidents as well as providing crucial long term support and advocacy for them. Community centres are also more likely to keep the survivor’s identity a secret, as they work in total anonymity. These solutions give survivors more support than traditional police work, which does not typically provide support for the survivor past legal action.

An organization like Walksafe McGill is a small-scale version of what many neighbourhoods and communities have implemented. The Réseau québécois de Villes et Villages en santé (the healthy communities network) is one program that asks community members to define what they want their community to be and allows them to come up with ways to prevent crime from occurring in the area. Other programs around Quebec include neighbourhood watch programs that encourage communities to police themselves and prevent crime through vigilance and community education.

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